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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE, SEMEP AND IPA; NSC FOR SHAPIRO/KUMAR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/22/2024
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [KWBG](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: OFFICIAL PALESTINIAN PROTESTS, SKIRMISHES IN WEST
BANK OVER GOI "HERITAGE PLAN"

REF: TEL AVIV 432

Classified By: Consul General Daniel Rubinstein, per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (SBU) Summary. The February 21 Israeli cabinet decision to include Hebron's Tomb of the Patriarchs/Ibrahimi Mosque and Rachel's Tomb (near Bethlehem) as "national heritage sites" prompted a flurry of strong official criticism from senior Palestinian officials, as well as demonstrations in both cities. Palestinian Authority (PA) Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, PLO Executive Committee Chairman Yasir Abd Rabbo, and PLO Senior Negotiator Sa'eb Erekat criticized the decision in separate calls and meetings. The PA Cabinet issued a public statement February 22 suggesting the decision constitutes incitement by "encouraging settlers' attacks on religious sites." Strikes and protests on the streets in Hebron and Bethlehem over the past two days resulted in skirmishes with Israel Defense Forces (IDF) personnel. End Summary.

PA Officials Condemn Decision

12. (C) Over the past 48 hours, Fayyad, Abd Rabbo and Erekat each criticized the GOI cabinet decision in calls and meetings with the Consul General. Fayyad noted that "no one denies the Jewish link to these sites," but added it was a grave mistake to assert Israel's national claim, especially at this time. Abd Rabbo said the timing of the decision -- in the run-up to Arab League Follow-Up Committee consultations regarding a USG proposal for proximity talks in early March -- "could not be worse." Yusif al-Natshah, director of archaeology for the Jerusalem Waqf, told PolOff that he considers this "a dangerous act because the Israelis, after 'Israelizing' Jerusalem, are now moving to the West Bank."

13. (U) On February 22, the PA Cabinet issued a public statement condemning the GOI decision. The statement explained that the GOI decision adds an "endless insoluble religious dimension" to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and "encourages Israeli settler attacks on religious sites" in the West Bank, such as the move by Israeli religious-nationalists to visit a Jewish synagogue in Jericho on February 21. Note: 80 Israeli settlers entered Jericho on February 21 after reportedly overpowering IDF soldiers at a checkpoint outside the city. These settlers marched to the synagogue before IDF and Border Police forces evacuated and arrested them. End Note. The PA Cabinet statement called on the international community, and specifically UNESCO, to condemn such actions.

Strikes and Protests in Hebron and Bethlehem

14. (SBU) Following the GOI decision, skirmishes between Palestinians and IDF troops occurred in Hebron on February 22

and in Bethlehem on February 23. Dozens of Palestinian youth reportedly threw stones at IDF forces and burned tires in Hebron, including in the Israeli-controlled area of H2. IDF troops responded with stun grenades, according to media reports. Residents of Bethlehem held a general strike on February 23. Although Jerusalem's Old City was also reportedly included on the national heritage sites list, no protests were reported in Jerusalem.

15. (U) Separately, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh on February 23 called on Palestinians in the West Bank to launch an uprising against Israeli forces in response to the inclusion of the sites on the heritage list.
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